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## THE NEED OF BIBLE STUDY.\*

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The devotional reading of the Scriptures marks, and to a large extent measures, the spiritual life of the churches. That is what we most vividly remember of the piety of the last generation. The godly men and women who gave us birth found in the pages of the Bible, as in a mirror, pictures of their own experiences, illumined with celestial or lurid light, and pored over them with intensest interest, in wonder, fear, or love. This generation does not surpass the last, and probably does not equal it, in its devotional use of the Scriptures.

A new literature on the Bible has sprung up, which is far more widely read than were any religious books in any previous generation. What are its characteristics? It must be remembered that neither the devotional nor controversial literature of the Bible, till near the middle of the nineteenth century, ever seriously questioned the current traditions concerning its origin, history, or purpose. The one was occupied with considering devout feelings and what creates them; the other with the meaning of doctrines concerning God and man, not with the facts or methods concerning their communication from God to men. To examine these critically was popularly regarded as sacrilegious.

But this new literature boldly interrogates the Bible on its own record of its history, scrutinizes the channels through which divine truth has come to men, and its unfolding in human experience, and on the basis of what it claims to have discovered, proposes to restate both doctrines and duties.

I do not assume that this literature is accurate or satisfac-

\* Read before the National Congregational Council, Worcester, Mass., November, 1889.

tory, only that it has great power of attracting attention to the Bible. These studies of scholars are coming down to the people in popular forms. They are reflected and distorted in fiction, read by those who never have read the Bible. So its statements are being considered as never before. The Bible was meditated upon by the last generation with results in sweet and saintly character. It is examined by this generation with awakening conscience and desire to know the truth. How may we direct that study to similar and greater results in holy character?

There are at least two things which give us encouragement to this effort:

First, the great increase in available knowledge of the Bible and of the divine revelation which it presents. More and more valuable historic facts concerning it have been discovered within the last fifty years than during the entire previous period since the Reformation. Its records have been compared with those in the earth, in the sky, in itself, in secular history, and in the history of language, till some beliefs which were half a century ago regarded as essential to Christian faith are generally discarded, and others which were little thought of have come into prominence, *e. g.*, few intelligent persons now believe the Bible to teach that God created the earth in six literal days; but the view which recent study of the Scriptures has unfolded, of the sweep of His creative power through myriads of centuries, impresses us far more profoundly than our fathers were impressed with the might and majesty of the Creator of the universe of worlds. Or, again, it is no longer held as essential that men should believe that those who wrote the Bible were passive instruments through which the will of God was made known to men. That view is left to the heathen whose prophets were soothsayers and diviners, and to spiritualists who pretend to pass into trances and become mediums of imaginary beings. But the discovery that the inspiration of the Spirit of God quickened and exalted the minds of men who used all their own faculties in harmony with the divine will to make known that will, gives new emphasis to the authority of the Bible by bringing the outward voice into the inward personal

life. To us, as to the Israelites, the voice from the midst of the thunder and smoke of Sinai means less than the teaching of Moses and his successors.

Further, the lay Christian of average intelligence knows more about the Bible than did the average minister of fifty years ago. In proof of this, it is only necessary to say that the average layman has access to far more helpful literature on the Bible than had the minister of fifty years ago, and uses it.

The second thing is that Christians are ready to study the Bible, never so ready as now; but they need guidance. There are more people ready to learn than there are qualified teachers ready to teach them. This is made plain by the summer assemblies which have sprung up in nearly every State in the Union within the last ten years, to which thousands come for Bible study, and by the large Bible classes in many of our cities. Many Christians are saying, "I do not enjoy my Bible, but I want to. Teach me how." Popular desire for Bible knowledge is great and growing.

Let me now try to show how to meet this desire more effectively than we are doing. I offer as a suggestion this plan:—

We have now passed to the study of the Gospel of Luke for the year 1890. We have in every community mature minds who wish to be Bible students. Let the subject for that class be, not the Gospel of Luke only, but the life of the ideal man, Jesus the Christ, making the lessons its prominent points. Let the minister plan and issue beforehand, for the quarter, outlines of these studies. These are not for his Sunday school, but for his teachers' class. As he uses them, he will show his teachers how to appropriate so much of these outlines in the international lessons as will suit the comprehension of their pupils.

The breadth of his subject, and the variety of its related themes, will enable him to hold all his people, without weariness, to this one line of study. Let the minister encourage the reading in families of biographies of Christ such as Stalker's, Edersheim's, and Geikie's, and such treatises as Godet's "*Studies in the New Testament*," Fairbairn's

“Studies in the Life of Christ,” and Thompson’s “Theology of Christ.” By such a pursuit the student will soon discover that the gospels are only a fragment of the record of that larger life which issues from beyond the horizon of the past and stretches beyond the vision of the future. He will ask questions concerning the kingdom which the Christ came to found, whose root ideas are in the Old Testament, and whose full realization is in prophecy. He will find that the Bible, as a whole, must be searched to find the answers to these questions, and is a literature, the chief source of the literature that inspires and has continued life. This will lead to a comprehensive study of the whole Bible, beginning with its primary facts, of which the majority of the church are woefully ignorant. Then follows the study of the development of the teaching of the Bible, beginning with the earliest facts in God’s revelation of himself and of his relations with men, tracing their growth through the experiences of men and of nations as they take on new meanings, till at last the facts of the Christian faith stand forth in the completed Bible, to grow richer in the apprehension of the church, as the Holy Spirit interprets them with increasing clearness in human experience.

By such study, better than by any other, the teacher learns how to teach; for every principle of teaching is illustrated by God’s method of teaching the race, from his giving the primary facts of revelation to its earliest childhood, to the mature disclosures of his purpose to bring the race into a perfect unity in Jesus Christ. Such an introductory training gives the Christian worker confidence and power to inspire confidence. If it could be made a definite object in the churches it would add much to their power.

Such a study made general would aid greatly the intelligent comprehension of the Bible, and of the true object of Christian work; of the first, because it discovers that the inspiration of the Bible is not merely a series of communications from God, but is a divine process of teaching truth brought up by his guidance out of human experience into utterance; of the second, because it shows that God’s method with each single life is the same as his method with the race.

He gave mankind the simplest facts concerning himself and his relations with them, and taught these facts mostly by object lessons. It required at least two thousand years to bring them to a condition in which they could receive the Ten Commandments, the simplest basis of moral law. Our fathers absolutely reversed the process, and attempted to give first the most difficult thing to the child. Who can imagine God giving Adam, as a primary revelation, the Westminster Catechism to be committed to memory? Our fathers seem to have regarded the mind of the child as constructed like the stomach of a cow, so that he could first swallow his mental food, then bring it up and chew it afterwards. The object of Christian work is to put truth into experience and then give it utterance. The student of the Bible expects to find new knowledge, and to come to new apprehension of truth, and to express it in new forms. Ignorance repudiates truth and error alike, if they are not found in the standards. One of the most difficult things to bring men to believe is that increase of emotion is not necessarily advance in Christian character, and that there is no growth in spiritual life without growth in knowledge of the truth.

Some suggestions naturally follow our consideration of this theme.

1. The great need is for better teaching. The church has sent forth a cry, but it has not been clearly understood. It has been supposed that the call is mainly for *more* ministers. When appeals for men to enter the theological seminaries are not met by larger numbers, then it is supposed that the difficulty is that men are not willing or able to prepare themselves by thorough study. So training schools are opened, and provided with brief, and mostly with fragmentary and disconnected, courses to create material to supply the demand for ministers. The churches in this country far less need more ministers than better ones, and a wiser disposition of them, and a large increase of lay workers wisely placed and guided.

It is a mistake also to suppose that every country parish, east or west, with a constituency not larger than many a Bible class, cared for by men and women who maintain

themselves by other callings, needs the entire strength of a minister prepared by ten years' study. There is great and needless waste of force in carrying on Christian work in this country. The Christian church as a whole would be stronger and more useful to-day, if it had fewer pastors more wisely organized and distributed. What is needed is more competent teachers of the Bible who do not depend on it for their living. There are hundreds of parishes which are in size only Bible classes. They ought to be led by teachers under the direction of bishops of larger dioceses.

Training schools for Christian workers are becoming numerous. They have large possibilities of usefulness, but their limitations need to be more clearly defined. It is not their business to make ministers. If the ministry is to maintain a high position in the respect of the people, we must have some uniform standard of examinations, and some competent board of examiners to issue certificates. Let us have Christian workers, deacons and deaconesses, if you please to call them so, as many as possible; but let our ministers be proved and approved, "faithful men who shall be able to teach others also."

2. The churches need more teaching by ministers, and less preaching in proportion to it. Why should not the second service be a service for Bible study by the entire church and congregation? It has been tried occasionally, and, so far as I know, successfully wherever the minister is competent to teach. The people are eager to be led in the study of the Bible.

3. More permanent pastorates are greatly needed, and could be maintained by teaching ministers. The average service of one hundred and fifty ministers in one of the foremost Congregational States in the Union was recently estimated at less than eleven months. One reason is, the preachers have exhausted their stock in trade within that time. There are too many sermon peddlers, whose packs are their barrels, who walk through dry places seeking rest and finding none, except for a few months. When one of these is gone out of a church, seven other peddlers, worse than himself, seek to enter in and dwell there; and the last state of

that church is worse than the first. It is not to be expected that such churches will be trained in Christian knowledge; that organized work will be maintained among the young, or that permanent work of any kind will be done in it. It is better that the pastor should renew himself, than that he should be replaced. That he can do, and remain with increasing acceptance if he is a prepared teacher of the Bible.

4. Finally, united effort by the churches to secure for them some fitting plan for Bible study, based on the conviction of its need, promises a great revival of interest in the truth. The time is ripe for it. Discussion of religious questions extends to all classes. Schemes for promoting human brotherhood are many, and sympathy of men for men is becoming more Christian in its tone. The ideal man is Jesus Christ; the ideal society is the kingdom of God. The Bible reveals them both; the Christian minister and the Christian church are appointed to make them known. Working together to that end, they will gain it, and "now is the acceptable time."